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ABSTRACT

The dynamics of a diverse work force characterized by organizational change, competition, and complex communication are increasing attention toward finding new ways of avoiding the costly and destructive outcomes of relationship dysfunctions. Litigation and legal negotiation are two of the most expensive ways of conflict resolution; and arbitration takes the power out of the hands of those in conflict. Conflict mediation, however, moves toward worker empowerment by involving mediators whose role is to help the parties negotiate their own resolution to a situation. Because most workplace conflicts will likely be repeated under new circumstances and in new situations, the goal of conflict management is to empower workers to resolve their own differences of opinion before those differences escalate into conflict. Because of the negative impact of conflict on worker creativity, efficiency, and productivity, many organizations are hiring conflict management specialists to train their employees in positives ways of resolving differences. Adult educators, educational administrators, health care and business professionals, and human resource managers are among those who are assuming new roles as leaders in conflict management. Among the techniques that have shown to aid acquisition of conflict management skills are the following: self-esteem training; drama and role playing; posters promoting conflict resolution; and teaming and in-team intervention. Contains an annotated bibliography of 21 print and Web-based resources. (MN)

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Conflict Management
Trends and Issues Alerts

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TRENDS AND ISSUES ALERTS

by Bettina Lankard Brown 1998

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

Conflict Management

The dynamics of a diverse work force characterized by organizational change, competition, and complex communication are drawing attention to interpersonal conflicts among workers. Organizational change, for example, alters the status quo and requires members of an organization to work together in new ways and under new rules. Competition compounds issues of power and escalates conflicts of personalities and behaviors. The complexities of communication make it more difficult for culturally, economically, and socially diverse workers to resolve the issues and problems they encounter on the job. These conditions have generated a need for new types of training and employee development programs to help workers acquire skills in conflict management.

Moving away from Litigation

The increase in conflicts occurring in the workplace and in society as a whole has created a strong interest in new ways of avoiding the costly and destructive outcomes of relationship dysfunctions. Litigation and legal negotiation are two of the most expensive and time-consuming ways to resolve a conflict between parties as they require court action and the involvement of legal counsel. Arbitration, another method for resolving conflict, involves a neutral third party to settle disputes among parties in a subjective manner. Like litigation and legal negotiations, however, arbitration takes power out of the hands of those in conflict and defuses their role in conflict negotiation and resolution.

Conflict mediation moves toward worker empowerment by involving the services of a mediator whose role is to assist the parties in negotiating their own resolution to a situation. However, since most workplace conflicts are likely to be repeated under new circumstances and in new situations, the empowerment of workers to resolve their own differences of opinions before they escalate to conflict is the goal of conflict management. "Conflict management is the ability to manage every-day situations that involve personal interactions involving differences of opinion. It differs from conflict resolution, where successful resolution means that the issue is totally resolved and finished" (Casey and Casey 1997, p. 160). Conflict management requires skills that are emotionally based, skills that reflect self-esteem, flexibility, and an openness to different ways of thinking and acting.

New Training Programs and Techniques

According to a recent Accountemps survey, "executives spend more than 9 weeks each year—18 percent of their work time—resolving personality clashes between employees" (Allerton 1996, p. 10). Such clashes can undermine morale, jeopardize teamwork, and potentially erupt into violent confrontations (Ramsey 1996). Because it is impossible to operate at a maximum level of creativity, efficiency, and productivity in the midst of turmoil, many organizations are hiring conflict management specialists to train their employees in positive ways to resolve their differences. Adult educators, educational administrators, health care and business professionals, and human resource managers are among those who are assuming new roles as leaders in conflict management (Blum and Wall 1997; Buller et al. 1997; Mhehe 1997; Strutton and Pelton 1997). Advice and strategies for resolving conflict are appearing in many recent professional journals and publications and are highlighted in training courses on conflict resolution, alternative dispute resolution, and conflict management.

Casey and Casey (1997) suggest self-esteem training as an aid to acquiring conflict management skills. Drama, such as forum theater and role play, is suggested as a way to engage learners in clarifying the issues and constructing solutions to conflict situations. For example, actors in a forum theater reenact and reconstruct certain situations of conflict and then invite the audience to participate by role-playing potential problem-resolving actions (O'Toole 1997). Other techniques include using posters to promote conflict resolution, detailing ways to handle anger, engage in active listening, practice win-win strategies, etc. (Phillips 1997); and using teaming and in-team intervention approaches to conflict resolution training (McEwan 1997; Reynolds 1998). The following resources provide additional information about conflict management efforts and strategies.

Print Resources

Allerton, H. "News You Can Use." ***Training & Development*** 50, no. 9 (September 1996): 9-11.

Reports the findings of various surveys related to communication, including the Accountemps survey regarding the amount of time executives spend on employee mediation.

Bellard, J. et al. ***Face to Face: Resolving Conflict without Giving In or Giving Up.*** Washington, DC: National Association for Community Mediation, 1996. (ED 410 473)

Modular curriculum developed to train AmeriCorps members addresses conflict at the personal and the interpersonal level. Provides concepts and tools to assist participants in working effectively and collaboratively within a group.

Blum, M. W., and Wall, J.A., Jr. "HRM: Managing Conflicts in the Firm." ***Business Horizons*** 40, no. 3 (May-June 1997): 84-87.

Describes the techniques human resource managers of Midwest firms have used to assist in and resolve conflicts in their organizations and the success they have realized through their efforts.

Buller, P. F.; Kohls, J.J.; and Anderson, K.S. "A Model for Addressing Cross-Cultural Ethical Conflicts." ***Business & Society*** 36, no. 2 (June 1997): 169-193.

Presents a model for addressing cross-cultural ethical conflict detailing effective strategies and using case study examples.

Burgess, H., and Burgess, G.M. ***Encyclopedia of Conflict Resolution.*** Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1997.

This encyclopedia—the first of its kind—presents all the concepts, techniques, information, resources, events, people, organizations, and training and academic programs vital to this important field.

Casey, M., and Casey, P. "Self-Esteem Training as an Aid to Acquiring Conflict Management Skills." ***Australian Journal of Adult and Community Education*** 37, no. 3 (November 1997): 160-166.

Describes the goals and activities of a training program designed to enhance the self-esteem of participants as a means of developing conflict management skills. Reports on participants' improvement

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in communication and problem-solving skills realized through participation in the training program.

Drory, A., and Ratov, I. "Effects of Work Experience and Opponent's Power on Conflict Management Styles." ***International Journal of Conflict Management*** 8, no. 2 (April 1997): 148-161.

A study identified low-power individuals as having a preference for a "dominating" style of relationship as opposed to "avoiding," "obliging," and "integrating" styles.

Dunlop, J., and Zack, A. ***Mediation and Arbitration of Employment Disputes***. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

Describes Alternative Dispute Resolution, a process that offers employers and employees a method for resolving disputes fairly and reasonably.

Gleason, S., ed. ***Workplace Dispute Resolution: Directions for the 21st Century***. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997.

Provides a variety of international viewpoints on effective dispute management. Examines how the interpersonal nature of a relationship determines the method selected to handle disputes.

Kottler, J. ***Beyond Blame***. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994.

Details a plan for addressing conflicts that arise in work, family, and life. Describes ways to alter destructive behavior patterns that contribute to interpersonal conflicts.

McEwan, E.K. ***Leading Your Team to Excellence: How to Make Quality Decisions***. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 1997. (ED 403 635)

Describes the concept of teaming and the ways in which decision making and group interactions influence team performance. Also describes strategies for building team trust, cooperation, and consensus reaching skills.

Mhehe, E. G. "The Role of the School Administrator in Conflict Management." Position paper, 1997. (ED 406 642)

Describes the conflict mediation/management role of educational administrators and points out that in selecting a strategy to adopt for conflict management, minimizing destructive aspects and maximizing efforts that contribute to organizational growth are top priorities.

O'Toole, J. "Rough Treatment: Teaching Conflict Management through Drama." ***Teaching Education (Columbia, SC)*** 9 (Summer-Fall 1997): 83-87.

Promotes drama as a way of teaching conflict management. Describes how clarifying, reenacting, and reconstructing situations of conflict through drama can enhance participants understanding of and ability to construct viable solutions to conflicts.

Phillips, P. "The Conflict Wall." ***Educational Leadership*** 54, no. 3 (May 1997): 43-44. (EJ 545 866)

Introduces the efforts of a supervising administrator in a Connecticut high school to promote conflict resolution across the school. Describes how posters were used to depict ways to handle anger in a positive manner, discuss win-win strategies for conflict resolution, describe cause-effect relationships, and outline strategies for apologizing and active listening.

Ramsey, R. D. "Conflict Resolution Skills for Supervisors." ***Supervision*** 57, no. 8 (August 1996): 9-11.

Recommends the use of conflict resolution training to avoid the ramifications of interpersonal conflicts within an organization. Suggests four areas of skill development: listening, questioning, communicating nonverbally, and mediating strategies. Also presents strategies of involving subordinates or other employees to improve the outcomes of conflict mediation.

Reynolds, S. "Managing Conflict through a Team Intervention and Training Strategy." ***Employment Relations Today*** 24, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 57-64.

Describes the effects of team breakdowns in the new management systems that rely on teams for problem solving and new product design. Describes a six-step intervention and training process using the intact-team approach.

Rothman, Jay. ***Resolving Identity-Based Conflict***. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997.

Describes how identity-based conflict can be managed. Explains the processes of antagonism, resonance, invention, and action and their application to a variety of environments.

Strutton, D., and Pelton, L.E. "Negotiation: Bringing More to the Table than Demands." ***Marketing Health Services*** 17, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 52-58.

Presents tips for successful negotiation of intraorganizational conflict in health care institutions, conflicts that involve the differing views of physicians, department heads, patients' attorneys, insurance companies, and trustees or medical staff.

Web Resources

Center for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies. ***Peer Mediation & Conflict Management Training***. Fresno, CA: Fresno Pacific University, 1997. <http://www.fresno.edu/dept/pacs/peermed.html>

Describes the Peer Mediation Training Program, which is designed to help participants explore interpersonal and group conflict and practice strategies used to help themselves and others mediate disputes among peers.

National Association for Community Mediation, 1726 M St., NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20036; 202/467-6226; fax: 202/466-4769; e-mail: nafcm@nafcm.org; http://www.igc.apc.org/nafcm/

National Institute for Dispute Resolution, 1726 M St., NW Suite 500, Washington, DC 20036-4502; 202/466-4764; fax: 202/466-4769; e-mail: nidr@nidr.org; Virtual Resource Center: http://www.nidr.org/

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